

MINUTES

The Ad Hoc Committee on Municipal Decision Making: November 12, 2008

The meeting began at 6 PM in the Hearing Room at City Hall. Present were committee members Lisa DePiano, Alex Ghiselin, Wendy Foxmyn, David Narkewicz, Michael Bardsley and Bob Reckman. Jesus Levya, Ken Mitchell and Adam Cohen were present and participated actively. Adam videotaped the meeting. Jim Palermo was not able to attend.

We agreed that we would follow Lisa's agenda and save time at the end to address several other topics Bob was concerned about. David agreed to be time keeper and Bob would keep the minutes.

We approved the minutes of our meeting of Nov. 5.

We also approved the overall outline of the draft report that Wendy and David created. We approved it in principle but noted that we might have to have another meeting to approve the executive summary.

We discussed how we would agree on our recommendations. We agreed that we would give Jim every opportunity to weigh in but would proceed with our process in order to meet our schedule. Jim will be at our next meeting.

We agreed to present our recommendations one at a time. Wendy wrote them on a large whiteboard in the room and Adam Cohen agreed to take a photograph when we were done that would be our record. He sent the photo later that evening.

David proposed that we develop a standard protocol for the conduct of public meetings that address what we have learned. Its concerns include regularizing agendas, public outreach and rules for public participation while recognizing the differences in needs of the specific bodies.

Alex suggested that the City's budget process should allow for more citizen understanding of the numbers and that the detailed information should be available electronically.

Wendy suggested that more public education in general should be encouraged. CitySchool is one example of things that could be done. The neighborhood, business and conservation oriented organizations could be useful in this effort.

Lisa suggested that we expand forms of city/public communication by using novel approaches.

Bob suggested that the City needs a “great website” and that different departments should be encouraged to participate regularly. It should include a complete calendar and a way for people to sign up for regular e-mail notifications.

Michael suggested taking a look at the City’s process for appointments of various sorts. The goal is to make it more transparent and creative.

Wendy suggested that the city adopt a vision and/or mission statement encompassing commitment to citizen engagement, ethical behavior and best practices in decision-making. Members reflected this was the intent of the resolution setting up our ad-hoc committee. Some suggested the City Council could pass a resolution to this effect.

David read Jim’s suggestion that early identification of stakeholders is a best practice. Meaning, all city officials should routinely ask themselves what sort of public input is a desirable and necessary component of many decisions.

Several members endorsed the suggestion that the CAC be re-established or the Best Practices Committee continue as a standing committee and/or an Ombuds position be created. Alex and David agreed that we would need a central staff person to lead the way on this. Their responsibility would be to be sure that information is available to the public and perhaps to serve as an ombudsman role.

Members suggested training/orientation for all new City officials, with refresher opportunities for all officials.

Wendy suggested that multiple appointments and term limits be looked at.

Michael suggested establishing a charter review commission.

David suggested the creation of a “Citizen’s Guide to Northampton” in a variety of media.

Bob pointed out the critical role of NCTV and the desirability of having more support (\$) from the city and other sources for coverage of municipal meetings..

Wendy suggested that the City adopt consistent, fair and widely-known policies for the use of City owned buildings.

Michael and David suggested that the City Council review its own rules and modify them in light of what we have learned about best practices. This would include the precedents of other cities.

Lisa emphasized the need for better communication among City departments, including adopting protocols.

Michael emphasized the city's role in promoting tolerance in our community in order to welcome and include all citizens.

Alex argued that Council often need their own independent legal resources. David suggested that should extend to other policy questions and consulting experts, as well. Wendy argued that the Council needs more resources (i.e., budget, staff) .

Wendy suggested tapping the education and skills of our citizens to work on some of the technical issues.

Wendy suggested the formal adoption of standards of ethical behavior, noting proposed new standards in the City of Springfield and a new state-level initiative promoted by Governor Patrick.

Michael suggested that we encourage an outside professional review of the Planning Department, similar to the reviews of the DPW and the Fire Department.

We took a 10 minute recess at 7:40 PM.

When we reconvened, we agreed that we would go through the list and try to select among, combine or elaborate all the items. Wendy did this on the whiteboard. We also agreed that we would each take a few areas to draft proposed language for the draft recommendations.

We agreed that a standard protocol for meetings, public involvement and decision making should be developed for use in all parts of the City government. (Michael will draft this language.)

We agreed that the City's budget process should be more open. (Alex will draft this.)

We agreed that public education should be encouraged in wide range of novel ways. (Alex will draft this.)

We agreed that better communication between the public and the city should be encouraged. A great website is one key component. It needs to allow for citizen response. A public information officer would be useful. NCTV is critical for this. Lisa will draft this.

We agreed that the City should review the appointment process for committees and do its best to be diverse.. (Michael will do this.)

We agreed that the City could have a mission or vision statement including its commitment to best practices. The City Council could pass a resolution in support of best practices. We could propose a specific resolution that could be adopted by the Council. (Wendy will draft this.)

We agreed that awareness of the importance of early and complete communication with citizens and stakeholders should be encouraged. (David will draft this.)

We agreed that Best Practices needs some continuing formal body to help the City move forward in improving its practices. (Wendy will draft this.)

We agreed that the city should provide training to all new City officials and do its best to be diverse. (Lisa will draft this.)

We agreed that the City Charter might be in need of review. (Michael will draft this.)

We were very short of time and did not complete our agenda. There was a brief discussion of how extensive our recommendations should be. We agreed that we would take the remaining issues up at our meeting on Nov. 19 in room 103 at JFK Middle School at 6 PM.

Wendy will not be at our next meeting. Lisa will be in California from late November until early January.

The meeting adjourned at 9:05 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bob Reckman